BUDGET

New Century. **Bold Plans.**

2000

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In the Legislative Assembly of Alberta

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Check Against Delivery

BUDGET

New Century. **Bold Plans.**

2000

Mr. Speaker, Budget 2000 is the result of the thoughtful input of every Government MLA here today. Their input is the result of following the instructions of our Premier who constantly reminds us that our job as MLAs is to listen to our bosses – the people of Alberta. It's their money, it's their future, and I believe Budget 2000 demonstrates that the people of Alberta know what's best.

Mr. Speaker, Budget 2000 is the first budget in Canada to be tabled this century. And, I believe it will be seen as a first in many ways. As a matter of fact, I am told it will be the only budget in Canada that will simultaneously:

- reduce debt,
- increase assets,
- increase health, education and people services,
- unhook from the federal income tax structure,
- free 132,000 low income Albertans from provincial tax,
- introduce a single tax rate,
- eliminate bracket creep,
- reduce fees and charges to the tune of $60 million,
- start a half billion dollar Science and Engineering Research Fund and
- claim for Alberta the title of the most people friendly province in the country.

Not a bad start for the 21st century, wouldn't you agree Mr. Speaker?

Mr. Speaker, this healthy picture of Alberta cannot be dismissed as luck or the result of windfall oil revenues. As a matter of fact, our economy has expanded dramatically beyond the very important sector of oil and gas:

- In 1985/86, of all the money we took in from corporate taxes, approximately 60 per cent came from the oil and gas sector.
- Last year, of all the money we took in from corporate taxes just 10 per cent was from the oil and gas sector, the rest came from a robust economy whose diversified base has expanded incredibly – especially in the areas of long-term, high-tech, high-paying value-added jobs with a future.

Stephen Leacock once said, "I am a great believer in luck and I find the harder I work, the luckier I get." In Alberta, we've been hard at work, and it's the policies of this province that have enhanced the abilities of Albertans to create prosperity, security and health.

Mr. Speaker, in 1992 it was Ralph Klein who began building the policy framework of a caring, yet limited, government. This framework led to unlimited opportunities for Albertans and to our present status as one of the most vibrant jurisdictions in the world.

In recent years, the budget process in Alberta has gone through a transformation. The usual process – still used in many jurisdictions today – consists of a year-long string of secret, high-level meetings. These meetings lead up to a budget speech full of shocks, surprises and announcements designed to give the impression that the government is eminently wiser than its citizens, and the citizens should be thankful the government had planned their lives for them for another year.

And election year budgets are often loaded with wonderful spending announcements full of sugar plums – sugar plums that had never even danced in the heads of taxpayers, but would hopefully make the government look sweet enough to re-elect.

Mr. Speaker, in 1993 the Klein government broke that budget mould. A Klein budget does not try to buy votes, it works hard to earn the respect of Albertans. The province's budget process is now a year-round cycle of open consultations with boards, agencies and municipalities, groups, and citizens across the Province. Our MLAs work closely with ministries to develop three-year business plans. In addition, we include short-term monitoring, which provides a full update of government revenue and spending every 90 days through our quarterly reports.

Budget day is no longer a day of unveiling government secrets, but rather an accounting of expected revenues and expenditures for the upcoming year. The only confidential items are those that could result in someone making a material gain from leaked information. For instance, if we were raising taxes on fuel or eliminating a user fee.

FORECASTING

Mr. Speaker, we not only publish our plans for the entire world to see, we also publish the sources we use to determine the risks and assumptions that are the basis of our plans. Alberta's revenues fluctuate more dramatically than revenues in other provinces because of the volatility of oil and gas prices.

Budget 2000 forecasts oil to average at the sustainable level of US$19 a barrel for the coming fiscal year, and targets natural gas at Cdn$2.50 per thousand cubic feet. Considering that, today, oil is hovering at the $29 a barrel mark, I'm sure to be criticized on our forecast number. For those who

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would bump the forecast, I'd first remind them that just one year ago today – February 24, 1999 – oil was only $12.61 a barrel. I'd also remind them that in 1998-99, we took in almost $1.5 billion less in energy revenues than in 1997-98. Yes, I said one and a half BILLION. I'd say there's proof that we need to build a budget 'cushion'.

And that's exactly what we've done. We forecast revenues as accurately as we can after an intensive economic review and consultation with leading analysts around the world. From there, we follow our own law, a law that requires us to set aside a reserve of money, an economic cushion of 3.5 per cent, at the start of each budget year. This cushion guards against drops in oil and gas revenues as well as against costly disasters or emergencies. In Budget 2000, our cushion will be just over $700 million.

So whether revenues rocket upwards, or plunge downwards, we are able to maintain a steady course for Albertans. Despite our critics Mr. Speaker, we're sticking with this system, because we tried the other way, and ended up with nine deficits in a row, increased taxes, and an accumulated debt of over $22 billion – debt that cost Albertans over $1.7 billion a year in interest alone.

Mr. Speaker, credit rating agencies regularly review our budgeting methods. We continue to get positive reviews from the toughest evaluators: Standard & Poor's has praised Alberta's fiscal planning, saying: "Thanks to its well established prudent budget management which makes allowance for the inevitable variability of its revenue forecast, Alberta delivered its fifth straight budget surplus".

So, I think we'll stick with the course that leads to lower taxes and lower debt, over one that results in higher debt and higher taxes.

SPENDING ON PRIORITIES

Mr. Speaker, before we look at the significant but essential spending increases in Budget 2000, I would like to challenge us all with a small change in wording in relation to spending. Often our critics imply that this government is a government that continues to cut money out of priority programs. They paint a bleak and horrifying picture.

Mr. Speaker, that type of criticism is not only inaccurate, it is irresponsible. It brings unwarranted fear to our most vulnerable citizens. So, just as we require honesty in advertising, I think we should expect honesty in criticizing.

So my challenge: when anyone demands more spending in the priority areas of health, education, infrastructure, children's services, or seniors, they should agree to alter the language, adding the word EVEN to the word MORE. They must stand up and say, "We demand <u>even more</u> spending on health, <u>even more</u> spending on learning, <u>even more</u> spending on infrastructure. This will provide context for Albertans.

I sometimes wonder when we insist on even more spending if we remember where these dollars are coming from.

The dollars aren't coming from a huge vault in the basement of the Legislature. I don't have bags of loonies sitting in my office. If we need even more money, we take it from the pockets of the people. Every two weeks on payday, we walk up to working Albertans and we say hold it right there; this is a government stick-up. We say hand over some of your hard-earned cash right now.

And you know, Mr. Speaker, most Albertans are ready to hand over some of their hard-earned money for essential services and to care for those who can't care for themselves. And because they are willing to share, we need to receive those dollars as a sacred trust.

HEALTH

On health care for Albertans, we will spend even more this year.

As a matter of fact, we will spend over nine per cent more this year than last year's base spending and 21 per cent more over the next three years. That is an increase of $1.1 billion, bringing our total spending on health to over six billion dollars. And here's what will be happening with that money:

- 2,400 more nurses and front line workers will be hired (over the next three years)
- 90 more physicians will be hired (in 2000-01)
- 5,947 major heart surgeries, up 10 per cent
- kidney dialysis for over 1430 patients, up 10 per cent
- 161 more bone marrow transplants, up 12 per cent
- 53 more liver transplants, up 10 per cent
- 29 more heart transplants, up 16 per cent

Add to this, thousands of knee and hip replacements, and you start to have a small idea of how it's easy to spend $17 million a day to operate our health care system.

And that doesn't count the even more dollars from Infrastructure that will be spent modernizing and renovating hospitals, and building more nursing homes.

Mr. Speaker, every province is experiencing huge increases in health care costs. In 1981-82, health care in Alberta consumed 22 per cent of our budget. In 1990-91, it was 26 per cent and this year it will be a total of 33 per cent of our program spending.

In a recent meeting with a Finance Minister from another province, I was told health care was now 40 per cent of their budget, and increasing daily. Any government that is committed to the principles of the *Canada Health Act*, as we are, needs to look for ways to deliver better services, reduce waiting

lists, and increase care. But, Mr. Speaker, I can tell you that many Canadian governments are paralyzed with fear over this topic. They're afraid that if they look at "different" or "new" ways of improving care in the health care system, they will be wrongly accused of trying to destroy the present, weakening system, accused even of trying to destroy Canada.

Mr. Speaker, may I remind our critics that as Government Members we too have families, spouses, children, grandchildren and aging parents. We don't want our children paying for health care. We know our parents cannot afford to pay for the advanced care they need in their sunset years. Do our critics really believe we would imperil the health and lives of our own loved ones? They shouldn't.

So, I ask them to put away their political scalpels, and join all Albertans in an honest and cooperative search for a better system. It's time to stop the name-calling. It's time to be bold and caring at the same time. It's time to face the challenges head on, ask the questions others are afraid to ask and develop bold new solutions that will lead to improving the standards of life and living for all.

That, Mr. Speaker, is what the whole discussion on health care is all about. Asking people to come forward with bold but people-friendly solutions for the delivery of services resulting in better care, shorter line-ups, no cost to the patient, and all within the *Canada Health Act*. Anyone with a proposal that doesn't meet those criteria need not apply, we're not interested. What we are interested in is improving quality of life and health for our loved ones, we're guaranteeing that in legislation, and you can take that to the bank, Mr. Speaker.

LEARNING

On educating Albertans, we will spend even more this year.

To that end, the base funding for Learning will increase by 9.2 per cent in this budget, and by almost 19 per cent over the three-year business cycle.

That means going from $4 billion in 1999-2000 to $4.8 billion in 2002-03. We have been spending more on Learning for years now, and with Budget 2000 we will spend even more.

For basic education (K-12), this spending will address a number of key areas such as:

- the hiring of 2,200 additional teachers and aides
- increased dollars for teachers' salaries and pensions
- growth in student enrollment
- a 10 per cent increase per year in students with severe disabilities
- 66 million more dollars per school year for projects aimed at improving learning and achievement
- $60 million this year alone to accelerate computer purchases

In the area of post-secondary education, we will also spend even more – 16.2 per cent or 144 million dollars in new funding over the next three years will help achieve the goal of adding 23,000 new spaces for post-secondary students. In addition, we'll increase financial aid for students by 22 per cent to $125 million this year and by nearly 50 per cent to $154 million, over the next three years, including:

- $18 million more for scholarships, bursaries and grants, and
- $17 million more for remissions on Alberta's student loans.

The remission program pays off a portion of graduating students' provincial loans, substantially reducing the amount that the graduates are required to repay. In effect, the loan remissions are success-based grants. For example, a student completing a degree program in four years is guaranteed to have no more than $20,000 to repay. Any loans above that limit are paid by the government.

Half of Alberta's post-secondary students do not take out provincial loans, but for the half that do, we will be there. This major funding increase will make sure that cost is not a barrier to taking advantage of post-secondary education.

INFRASTUCTURE

The government made a solid commitment to its municipalities to maintain and develop the necessary structures to deal with the ongoing, phenomenal growth in Alberta. This last year our population increased again by over 50,000 people. It's as if another Red Deer burst forth from the ground over the last 12 months.

So this year, we will commit even more money to infrastructure, in fact we're committing another $745 million in accelerated funding to meet the demands to modernize schools, colleges, universities, and health care facilities, to upgrade seniors' lodges, repair roads, widen highways, replace bridges and improve water management facilities. That's on top of base spending of about $1.1 billion a year.

AGRICULTURE

Mr. Speaker, we as Albertans are well aware of how the bad weather combined with falling commodity prices pounded and paralyzed the family farms of Western Canada. In thousands of cases, these farms have faced disastrous conditions for three, four, even five years in a row. I suppose we could stand by the sidelines and demand that the federal government do more to help our farmers. But that simply isn't good enough.

In response to the disastrous commodity prices and climate challenges, we have announced a series of changes to the Farm Income Disaster Program. We expect that as many as 10,000 family farms will benefit from increased

payments under the enhanced program. The program changes will also apply to 1999 farm income losses. The Farm Income Disaster Program is expected to pay out $170 million again to over 10,000 family farms to help offset the losses for that year. And we will continue our commitment to the enhanced Farm Income Disaster Program.

SENIORS

Many of the new people moving to this province from across Canada are senior citizens. The quality of life and the level of benefits for our seniors are the best in the country. And, Mr. Speaker, we are proud to say to our seniors, thank you for a life filled with hard work and generous giving. That is why we are pleased to announce a 10 per cent cost-of-living increase to the Alberta Seniors Benefit.

This program provides cash benefits to more than 130,000 lower-income seniors. And low-income seniors with special needs can also apply for assistance from the Special Needs Assistance for Seniors program. This is a program that is unique in all of Canada and will be increased by 16 per cent by the year 2002-03.

Yes, Mr. Speaker, we are pleased to say it is the wish of our citizens to do even more for our seniors who have done so much for us. Budget 2000 makes that commitment.

CHILDREN

Mr. Speaker, it is almost a cliché to say that families are the most important and fundamental building block of our society, but it's true. Family policy must not invade family life and must be approached with care so that government does not become a replacement for families through the provision of well-intended services – services that may in the long run create dependency. We need policies that foster independence. Our policy in the provision of social welfare on the instruction of our citizens has been to help those who cannot help themselves.

That said, we will put even more towards the child health benefit program; we will in fact increase it by 50 per cent this year. This is in addition to the overall increase of funding to the new Ministry of Children's Services – a six per cent increase in funding this year, and 16 per cent increase over the next three years.

The first ever Alberta Children's Forum, chaired by Colleen Klein, has brought forward insightful ideas on key issues such as health, learning and substance abuse. The report will guide us on how we can appropriately help families in need.

FISCAL MANAGEMENT

Since 1993, we have undergone significant restructuring and implemented efficiency improvements when it comes to government services. The road has not been easy and we continue to remain tough-minded when it comes to fiscal restraint in government.

It's true that we have increased spending for health, education, and in the area of peoples' needs. But it is interesting to look at our budget spending trend-line and see that, overall, in all other areas of government spending, we are in fact not increasing funding but we are increasing efficiency in service delivery. We have projected a three-year spending profile that is sustainable, responsible and accountable. That's the way our citizens want it and that's the way we plan to deliver it.

Now I'd like to shift the focus to the areas of fiscal management that have given us the ability to provide even more to Albertans.

DEBT PAYDOWN

Mr. Speaker, most Albertans clearly understand that debt does not pay – it costs, and it costs big time. The only way to reduce those big costs is to pay down that debt. That is why debt reduction continues to be a major weapon in the attack on government costs.

Not only is debt paydown a policy, it is in fact, the law in our Province. The *Fiscal Responsibility Act* requires us to pay down debt at a certain rate and according to a defined schedule. The law does not permit us to simply spend our so-called surpluses. We have to commit the major portion of those so-called surpluses to debt reduction. In fact, most of our windfall revenue in 1999-2000 was applied to pay down the debt. Our total debt payment for this last year will be a whopping $1.6 billion dollars.

Albertans will recall that we paid off our net debt in June of last year. That means we are the first and only province in Canada to own more than we owe. And with the debt paydown planned in this budget, I am delighted to report that our debt servicing costs will be below $1 billion dollars for the first time in 12 years. In 1994-95, our debt servicing costs were $1.75 billion dollars. By being aggressive and committed to debt paydown, we now have saved three quarters of a billion dollars in interest costs every year that we are able to apply to health care, education, seniors and tax reductions.

Mr. Speaker, other people have said that a legislated debt paydown plan can't work. You know, Mr. Speaker, people shouldn't use the word "can't" or the word "impossible" when they are talking to Albertans. We just get fired up and say, "Why not"?

We not only reduced our debt this past year, we also put almost a quarter of a billion into the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund to protect the value of the Fund from inflation. That Fund is worth over $12 billion today in

marketable securities and earned us income in 1999-2000 of $950 million. Interestingly, that earned income was almost identical to the amount that we received from crude oil royalties in the same year. I think it's significant, Mr. Speaker, to realize that our investment over the years, which was built up by oil and gas royalties, earns annual income equal to the amount of money that the government gets annually from oil coming out of the ground. That's a platform of security. And it is solidly in place for the 21st century.

FEES AND CHARGES

Mr. Speaker, the Klein government is always looking for ways to lower the burden on Albertans for the services they receive. And this holds true whether we are talking about taxes on people, taxes on business, or fees and charges for providing specific services.

There has been much sound and fury about fees in Alberta, but the plain facts are that in the past eight years the total revenue raised in Alberta from premiums, fees and licenses has not kept pace with inflation and population growth.

However, Alberta will always look for ways to continue lightening the load for Albertans. Recently, the Supreme Court ruled that if fees were in excess of the actual cost of the service, then governments had a choice:

- they could bring the fee into legislation and call it a tax, which would allow the government to retain the fee at its high rate; or
- lower the fee.

Mr. Speaker, the reaction to this ruling in most other provinces was to introduce legislation to protect the fees in question and retain them at their high rates. Alberta could have done the same thing. However, we took this opportunity to order a full review of all fees and charges to determine which ones could be lowered. We were the only government in Canada that chose to review all fees, and upon review reduce the ones that were too high, rather than protecting them in legislation.

The review found that the vast majority of fees charged in Alberta did not cover or only approximately covered the cost of providing the services associated with those fees. However, in a number of areas we identified fees that could be lowered.

And that is what we are announcing today.

Fees relating to the legal requirements around estates and wills, the so-called probate fees, will be lowered effective midnight. But we are not stopping there. We are also lowering fees relating to the registration of Land Titles and charges for Corporate and Personal Property Registries. Effective midnight tonight, over 100 fees related to these particular areas will be reduced or eliminated.

This will mean a very significant drop in the charges that a family now pays when they purchase their home. Under the old fee schedule, a family paid $365 in fees when purchasing a $150,000 home with a $140,000 mortgage. Under the new fee schedule, this charge will be reduced by almost two-thirds to $133. Now that's real money for young homebuyers, Mr. Speaker.

And the cost to process a letter of probate on an estate worth $150,000 will be cut in half from $600 to $300.

Alberta business, which includes small business, family business and large business, will also benefit from reductions in corporate registry fees. For instance, we are reducing the certificate of incorporation fee from $300 to $100. The $10 cost to file an annual return has been eliminated, and certificates of a limited partnership have been reduced by two thirds, from $150 to $50. There will also be significant reductions in costs associated with personal property registry and registering a security agreement. In an era when more and more people are self-employed service providers, this is a genuine saving.

Mr. Speaker, the government is cutting fees and charges by $60 million. That is $60 million more in the pockets of Albertans. Alberta continues to lead the way on making Alberta the best place to live and to do business.

TAXES

Mr. Speaker, in Budget '99, I detailed the elements of a bold new tax plan, which we thought we would be able to bring into reality in the year 2002. As we announced a few months ago, we are able to accelerate the launch of that new tax plan and will do so in ten short months.

The way people think about taxes is often a reflection of their own human nature, their philosophy of life. People who tend to be philosophically "small- l" liberal lean towards large government with large spending programs designed to heal the ills of the world. One thing we have learned through this last century is that liberal approaches to government and spending lead to unaffordable institutions and programs, increased dependency, eventual deficit financing, and, finally, crushing debt which squeezes the very breath of incentive from the citizens and leaves them gasping for air under unbearable taxation loads.

On the other side are people who tend to be philosophically "small-c" conservative. They lean towards limited government, less dependency, and low taxes to allow individuals the greatest freedom to live, work and raise their families. The philosophically conservative approach to government and spending leads to strong private institutions, sustainable programs for those who cannot help themselves, and a strong economy from a lighter tax burden that allows individuals to freely breathe the air of their own success.

Mr. Speaker, when we did our intensive consultation with Albertans two years ago on the issue of taxes, they came up with the guidelines for a bold

new approach to taxation. The response, I believe, revealed the heart and nature of most Albertans.

Albertans insisted that a new tax plan must be sensitive to the needs of low-income Albertans, those who were struggling to get their start in the world. That response clearly revealed a generosity of spirit for which Albertans are famous. That response is also why our new plan drastically increases the basic exemption levels from $7,131 to $11,620 and the spousal exemptions from just over $6,000 also to $11,620. This move means all Albertans are able to earn more money before they are punished by the tax man for being hard working and innovative. It also will mean an extra 132,000 low-income Albertans will not have to pay any provincial income tax at all. Now that's freedom, Mr. Speaker.

The next thing Albertans said was there had to be fairness in the system. That meant that government should neither punish nor reward a family for its choice of whether to be a single-income or dual-income family. They said the taxation levels for each should be equitable, and that's why we are raising the spousal limit to the same level as the basic personal exemption. This move will also allow a single parent to enjoy the new basic exemption of $11,620, while applying the spousal exemption of $11,620 to the first child, and greatly alleviating taxation pressure.

Then Albertans said that a new taxation system had to be honest. That meant, the government had to quit hiding behind one of the most insidious ways of collecting taxes, a little bit of nasty trickery called bracket creep. When governments do not index the basic exemption levels to the rising cost of inflation, citizens wind up paying more taxes. That's because their salaries are inflated upwards, but their exemption levels aren't, so they pay more tax. We don't want to be tagged with those who refuse to fix this problem, so the new tax plan will tie the basic exemption levels to any rise in inflation, making us the first and only province to rid our citizens of "The Creep."

Albertans also reflected what's in their nature when telling us that a tax system needs to be not only honest, but also transparent, and understandable. Someone once said, "The hardest thing in the world to understand is the income tax system." That person was Albert Einstein. And if it was too tough for him to figure out, then it's beyond me and most of the people I know.

Albertans said, "Make the tax system fair, equal and transparent for everybody." That's why, as of January 1, 2001, we will introduce a system which will allow Albertans to claim our new, much higher personal and spousal exemptions as well as other existing deductions. Then the government will apply a simple, single rate of 11 per cent on their remaining income. We will be the first and only jurisdiction in Canada to take this liberating step. Once again Albertans lead the way, Mr. Speaker.

When this plan is in place, Albertans on average will experience a 15 per cent reduction in their provincial income taxes. And, equally as exciting is that we will then have a system in place in which we can quickly and easily

move to even further reductions — either by simply lowering the rate of 11 per cent or increasing the basic exemption levels.

Mr. Speaker, Alberta's motto of "Strong and Free" is a living reality for the hard working taxpayers of this Province. Mr. Speaker, the government will be taking $852 million less out of the pockets of Albertans than it took in 1998. And as a government, we are convinced that the invigorating effect this tax plan will have on the economy, and on Albertans' incentives to work, will mean that more people will move to Alberta, more jobs and opportunities will be created, and in fact, we will bring in more revenues. All of which will result in greater security and support for the priority social programs that are important to Albertans.

Mr. Speaker, in this rapidly changing global economy, the status quo of economic conditions is not acceptable. As a government, we must continually provide the right climate for our citizens. It is with this in mind that our Premier has requested a business tax review. This review is underway and will survey all forms of taxation on small businesses, family businesses and large businesses to see what we, as a government, can do to make sure our citizens are as free as possible to release their creative energies.

CANADA PENSION PLAN

Mr. Speaker, we are also continuing in our two-track approach to pension reform. On track one, we have asked our provincial and federal partners to examine some proposals we have developed that we believe could vastly improve the Canada Pension Plan and potentially lower the contribution rates.

The second track involves examining the possibility of an Alberta Pension Plan. While there remain significant challenges, pension experts estimate that we could establish an Alberta Pension Plan that delivered the same benefits as the CPP with a significantly lower contribution rate.

We are not announcing that we are moving to our own plan. We would not do that without the approval of Albertans. Alberta is committed to working with its federal and provincial partners to bring about needed changes to the CPP for the benefit of all Canadians. However, at the request of many Albertans, we will also continue to study the feasibility of an Alberta Pension Plan.

ENDOWMENT FUND

Mr. Speaker, this government recognizes that attracting research and encouraging innovation are important components of a strong and vigorous economy. A key part of our strategy to attract research is our policy of low taxes, limited government and an entrepreneurial climate. Another key element of our strategy is the establishment of a $500 million Alberta Heritage Foundation for Science and Engineering Research. Together, these

keys will provide incentives for Alberta's brightest minds to stay here in Alberta and recognize that Alberta is the place to be.

What's the sum total of all of our taxation and fiscal policies? It is clearly the ongoing economic growth and prosperity that we are seeing in Alberta.

Mr. Speaker, last year total employment rose by 2.8 per cent, with almost 43,000 new jobs created in 1999. Our employment rate averaged 94.2 per cent, the second best among all the provinces. Our population grew by two per cent and that was almost double Ontario's population growth. And, Calgary closed out the year with 103 head offices on their directory, second only to Toronto, which has 123 head offices. I won't detail the growth in all the cities and towns around our beautiful province other than to say it was in most cases healthy and in the rest spectacular.

Our forecast for this year is that economic growth is expected to be in the range of 4.5 per cent, meaning we can expect 48,000 new jobs to be created. These jobs will be almost entirely in the private sector and many will be long-term, high tech and high paying positions.

So, Mr. Speaker, as I have touched on the key and significant areas of Budget 2000, we can look back to the last few years of the 20th Century and make some positive assumptions about our launch into this new Century. As I summarized at the beginning of the speech, from one budget year to the next, we continue to offer lower taxes, lower debt, and increased health and education support, resulting in an endless sea of opportunity.

Mr. Speaker, dreams become realities because they are built on firm foundations. The foundation with which we start the 21st Century can lead to bold dreams that others would not even dare to consider. Our debt is going down at an aggressive pace – we can imagine the day when we are debt-free. Our taxes continue to go down.

Think about it Mr. Speaker: Without a billion dollar debt payment, and with income increasing from the Heritage Fund, and with the economy continuing to expand at a rapid rate, the bold dream of living in a jurisdiction without provincial income taxes is no longer something to laugh at.

We're not there yet, Mr. Speaker. But, what we do know is that every year, the Klein administration has set goals that many said we would never attain, and each year we attain and surpass them.

Will we ever attain these bold dreams, Mr. Speaker? The history of Alberta in the 20th Century was an epic of challenge and triumph. Mr. Speaker, I believe that the hearts and souls of Albertans, combined with the providence of the Almighty, and a respect for the principles of divine and human nature, will result in the realization of these bold dreams for us and for our children and grandchildren.

Good afternoon, Mr. Speaker.